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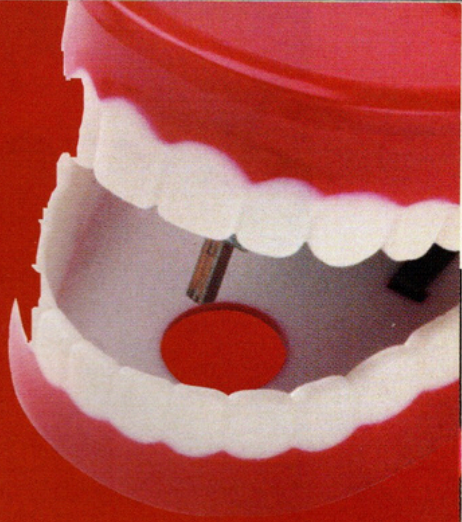

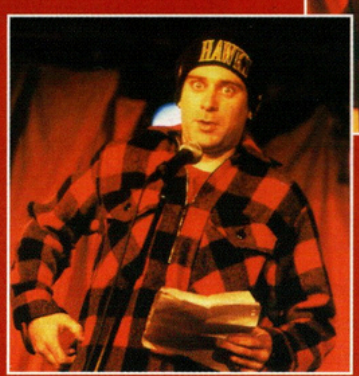

Comedy can be very subjective, and when you're a first-time stand-up comedian, there's no telling which way it will go. **Claire Halliday** follows two virgin comics to the stage.

RACHEL PARKINSON, 26, is nervous. In less than two hours she'll be taking her turn on stage for a debut crack at stand-up comedy. Usually, her on-stage performances are limited to shows that feature the musical abilities she feels much more at ease with. Tonight, she's trying 'Champagne Comedy' at Melbourne's Armadale Hotel "just to see what it's like". Her friends tell her she's funny all the time but, in-between tugs at her curly hair, Rachel admits that even her occasional moments of witty conversation probably won't carry her through the allotted five minutes she has during tonight's try-out time.

"I think I'll last about two. I think I'll talk too fast," she says. The guitar she clutches is a security blanket for the duration. When she's not playing it to accompany the two limericks she has penned for the occasion, she'll use it to check the cheat notes she's stuck to the back to guide her through her routine.

Material-wise, she's counting on her observational skills to keep a fickle pub crowd at bay. With no real expectation to achieve comedic success in the long-term, Rachel says that stretching her life in stand-up comedy beyond midnight, depends on how many laughs she gets… if any.

"If it's really bad, I'll stick my head in the sand and never come back here," says Rachel. If that does happen, at least she hasn't invested too much time for nothing. Admitting she only wrote her stuff the day before, Rachel says her experience watching other stand-up comedians perform has taught her that delivery is everything and material is secondary.

"It's all about confidence," she says. "Sometimes you get people like me who are really nervous and they're just not as funny because of their delivery. It doesn't matter how funny their jokes actually are." ►

"WE'LL GIVE ANYONE A GO. **WHETHER THEY'RE FUNNY** IS REALLY ONLY UP TO THEM."

Unfortunately, just how funny her jokes will be is something she has no confidence in. Unable to pick a real gem from her material, Rachel can only promise to offend as many people as possible with her brand of "pretty filthy" humour.

Meanwhile, Tony 'Slatts' Slattery, 25, is hoping more for laughs than revulsion. After a childhood of Saturday afternoon Jerry Lewis matinees, the craving for a career as a funny man has been a life-long dream. As a former member of a sketch comedy trio, he's been up on stage before, but never solo. Preparing to perform a piece he's done just once before in a university competition, Slatts is hoping that sinking into the character he will be playing – a simple country boy who has spent three months in the big city and returned to home turf as a guest speaker to year 12 students – will help absorb a few of his nerves.

"I was all right until we pulled up in the car around the corner and my stomach's just gone 'whoah'." Despite the nerves he has faith in the kindness of the crowd… and he hopes that their few hours of steady schooner drinking before his scheduled appearance at 11:15pm might help them appreciate his humour.

"If I get up tonight and don't do a great job the people here won't really heckle me. They might make you feel uncomfortable but they won't boo you off. Most people would be thinking, 'God, if I was up there, I'd feel crap', so they try not to make it worse," Slatts says.

If it works, Slatts is hoping to pursue his comic aspirations with more gigs and the development of other characters. He's already got two more spots booked for other try-out nights, including a return stint in one month. His ultimate dream is to make a living from it – something he thinks might be possible by doing the rounds of the comedy circuit. Then there's always the possibility of TV fame and fortune. "Telling jokes for a living – it would have to better than working," he says.

LAVK *Rachel Parkinson (left) gets a big laugh from the audience when she can't find a place to plug her guitar in, while Tony Slattery (above) gets into character as a flannel-shirted country boy in the big smoke for the first time*

His girlfriend and housemate are somewhere in the audience – everyone else has been told to stay away. Tonight he wants the benefit of unbiased ears, so he can judge what works and what doesn't to allow for a bit of rewriting before the next performance.

"It's still that whole thing about acceptance – will people like what I do? I don't know the answer to that."

While he's waiting to find out, MC Brad Oakes is in fine form, regaling the mostly student crowd with the use of the word usually banned from commercial television. "Has anyone else here had a haemorrhoid?" He moves across the stage – simulating a sudden attack. On Champagne Comedy night anything goes, and the audience loves it.

With the headline acts over, Oakes is convincing the crowd to linger. Encouraging them to cheer the fresh faces the amateur section offers. "You're a bit looser now," he says. "Some of you are a bit pissed – I know I am."

There's a bit more banter to keep them laughing before the introduction. "Here for your comedic pleasure – let's welcome Slatts." Donning a flannelette shirt and beanie, he launches into his schtick with seemingly controlled calm. When the crowd laughs, it's a comforting wave of guffaws. When other jokes fall flat, it's a too-long second of silence before he launches into the next line.

Backstage later, he's too fresh from it to tell what his future as a comedian might be. "My girlfriend said it was great, but she would," he says. "I was pretty aware through the whole thing that I wasn't relaxed. Some things I thought people would laugh at just didn't work and other things I didn't think were funny, they liked."

Rachel is next and gets one of her biggest (and unintentional) laughs when she can't find the right place to plug her guitar into. After that, it's up and mostly down, with some attempts at humour (making up a pornographic name for herself if she was ever to join The Spice Girls) greeted by the shocked silence she had predicted. When she sings a song about the messy aftermath of sex, the laughs come thick and fast. But barely two minutes later she's had enough.

"I had three things that I wanted to do tonight," she tells the audience. "One of them was to make at least one person laugh, one of them was for me to not cry and the other one was for me to not wet my pants. Since I've achieved two out of three, I think I'll f@#! off." And she does. As she licks her wounds backstage, another comedian takes her place. "I'm never going to do it again," Rachel sighs. "It wasn't very fun."

According to Lou Stomm, the organiser of Champagne Comedy, the results are a typical representation of the whole scene. Out of 100 per cent of try-outs, he says, two-thirds will keep trying, while one-third drop out straight away. And when it comes to criteria for selecting new comic talent, Lou says he will take anyone willing to use their real name.

"We'll give anyone a go," says Lou. "Whether they're funny is really only up to them."